

The Alternative Line

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A 50 Year Retrospective, 26 of which were with CNY PCA

It should take no math genius to figure that I couldn't have been a charter member of CNY, to say nothing of PCA. When CNY was founded, I barely knew what a car was. That awakening pretty much started around three years later, when I was 10 (do the math). I was always something of a "wrench", which was both godsend and bane of my mother's existence. I definitely did not get it from my father, who pretty much barely knew what a tool was, let alone how to use it. His bent was anatomy, which led to his being a Funeral Director, at least during my formative years. And my mom was not really mechanically inclined, though she had more clue than my dad. I really didn't know much about my grand-dad (father's side), but I knew a lot about my mom's dad, and he certainly knew one end of a wrench from the other. He was a Fire Chief at the time of the "Shirt-Waist Factory" fire which killed so many young immigrant women and led to many of the safety devices (like external fire escapes) we take for granted today. To watch his eyes as he described the agony of his inability to do anything for the victims was telling.

And since his only son, my uncle Dan, was also a whiz with tools, I'm pretty sure where I got the skills. But the Drouts were direct Irish descendants, so my Germanic blood came from my father's side. That makes me an odd fellow indeed, since they, too, profess to have Irish heritage. Methinks some brown bread got mixed with the potato harvest one year, though. But I believe my mechanical skills were honed at an early age. My mom would regale visitors with my having DIS-mantled numerous household devices long before I recall her ever mentioning my mantling any. But at some point, again around 10, I actually started to repair stuff. So it was not much of a leap when at age twelve I asked my parents to loan me enough so I could buy a walk-behind snow plow, merely the first of my entrepreneurial bents. After all, my grandpa had "bought his first horse when he was twelve", which he used to tell us with pride. Up to that time I had borrowed the family lawn mower and shovel. So income was limited. But from the point of buying the plow, my parents never gave me any form of "allowance" for personal discretionary spending.

Both my aunt Miriam and uncle Dan Drout had been victims of polio. Dan was forced to wear braces his entire life thereafter. Those braces, for anyone who has studied FD Roosevelt, who lived in my same Hyde Park along the Hudson River, were a weighty burden. No titanium nor aluminum alloys; they were heavy chromed steel. But he adapted surprisingly well, including purchasing three BMW Izettas because their front opening door allowed him to sit on the floor to release the brace locks, then lift himself into position in the front bench seat, where the hand-control modified steering and pedal system swung to position when the door was closed. To call them rare is an understatement, and to have 3 of them... But it was his awareness of the unique properties of foreign cars which piqued my interest. Mind, though, that I still appreciated the 'Merican Ahrn' as embodied in the '64 Ford Galaxie 500 Convertible, which arrived at the same time as the 901 from Porsche, still totally off my radar screen. And I had never given more than a first glance at any 356. Sorry, guys.

Anyway, Uncle Dan had modified a whole host of things to allow him to get practical use and personal independence despite his physical handicap. And remember, this was long before we had blue boxes with white wheelchairs painted on the close-in spots. I would marvel at his hand control setups. He was as adept at driving a manual gearbox car as anyone I have ever met, despite having no ability to operate his legs whatsoever. And he had a table saw with lathe, drill press, and a host of other tools he used as easily as you or I would. Having no kids of his own, he used to spend a lot of time with me talking about how "we" might modify something or another to allow it to do a job it was never intended for in the first place, and often better than the "official" tool made specifically for the job. If any of you have been mortified to see the soup can adaptations on the heat exchangers in my 911 and 993, you can thank my uncle Dan. I consider it an honor to acknowledge his "press-on-regardless" attitude as founding mine. It was therefore heart-wrenching when my aunt Marie allowed his Izettas to become cat boxes when he passed. Had she done otherwise, I might be driving an M3 today.

Coming from lower middle-class and a large family (six kids), merely feeding us was pretty much our family "luxury". As the first son, despite being third born, I was lucky to avoid most "hand-me-downs". My brother used to joke by answering my mom's inquiries about how some pants fit with "they are a little tight around the armpits". So you can understand that the whole concept of a car whose purpose was almost entirely non-essential was lost on my parents. Most everything they bought had been bleached somewhat by the "flashing blue light" over it at the K-Mart. But earning my own money made me both more aware of the effort it took, and the sweetness of the reward once obtained. And I did understand Winston Churchill's "Americans know the price of everything and the value of nothing" remark.

So I am certain it came as a shock to my mom when I first saw the 911 Targa, and I told her I would someday own one. She had grown up in the depression era, and oft quoted the family mantra; “if you aren’t working, get your fork out of that chop”. Not that frugality doesn’t have its place, but I can assure you that my ’77 Targa, with all its warts and the myriad of repairs over the 220K+ miles I have owned it is still, by a wide margin, the most economical car I have ever owned. And where I learned that family budgets are essential, but should also contain allowances for “soul”. I recall when I was first diagnosed as a diabetic being put on a 1200 calorie diet. Having had my mom be an insulin injecting diabetic for all my life, I was well aware of the concerns. But after adhering to the regimen for two months, documenting daily (I am a pretty good test engineer), my doctor told me that if I kept it up, I could hope to live a long life. I replied “Who the hell wants to?” I’m not here for a long time; just a good one ;-)

I was a poor student, yet did fabulously well on the SAT’s. I was told by SU that I didn’t have a chance of being accepted there, yet after I had committed to Clarkson, I was. I failed Physics 1 twice, yet I am a pretty good mechanical engineer. I was nearly tossed from college, having gotten almost a full year behind by the end of my Freshman year, and a draft number of 105. Yet I graduated with my class. I won the Superior Cadet Award my frosh year, and even thought of the Army as a career. They turned me down. So I grew a beard, which I have never shaved to this day. My politics are certainly those of business, but I am embarrassed for my party because I find their religion and lack of integrity an affront. I love to work on machines, to understand what makes them tick. Yet I have done as much with computers and software as anything mechanical. I love to be home, yet my favorite career times have been when I wasn’t. I am an engineer, but I am also an artist and creative guy. Despite loving to play guitar, and the audiences prove that I’m not incompetent, yet I cannot read a note of music; I am entirely self-taught and by ear only. And it’s a 12 string, concert box. I consider what I do to be terribly important, and myself a lot less so. But I need my pats on the back also. I have never been a “Dilbert” manager, but I have accomplished more as a manager than as a direct contributor. I am a bushel of paradoxes.

I wrote a piece many moons ago (check my website if you really are that anal) which asked whether a Porsche was a luxury or a necessity. Only a myopic would truly call it the latter. But the Timothy Law should remind us that Mental Health is just as important as physical well-being. So, while I know I COULD live without one, like your intrepid editor, I also know my life would be substantially diminished for having done so. In this era of concern for the environment, there are many who see the automobile in general as the boogey-man, and even the EU is pressuring Germany to limit Autobahn speeds to 70 mph. I hope that never happens, and certainly not while no restrictions exist for huge yachts, private jets, and the host of other carbon footprints like that at the end of a Monty Python theme. I reverse the Pirelli theme; “Control without Speed is Worthless”. Comes from my manufacturing days.

In fact, I would ask that you inquire of a colleague of ours, Norm Turbee, who seems to have gotten the PCA bug in a big way. Ask him about his experience (c’mon, Norm, WRITE about it ;-)) and how he came to be at the 50th weekend in Alex Bay. In looking around the room at the main banquet, I was struck by the number of people who had substantial impact on getting our club and region to that point, who would never have even heard of us without a whacko who followed people home just to tell them about us. Who drove to East Syracuse to rescue a guy when his 944 Turbo timing belt bit the big one while he was a LONG way from his home near Binghamton. Who almost got a 911 call as a stalker from at least three women whose husbands have left an indelible impact which will not be forgotten for a long time. The number of (ahem) “students” who have done laps in the “Club Car” long before Bill or Botho got theirs, and have ultimately become instructors themselves. The young friend whose parents were so mortified at his asking to borrow my 993 for his High School Prom, and who cleaned it better than I ever will, and still keeps the photos of the car, long after the girl and he parted. The guys with cognitive dissonance who were never really sure they could justify a Porsche, until they spent a few miles finding their synapses hard-wired to mine. The daughter who has been preparing for this since she was a sperm, came home from the hospital on her first day in one after being delayed until I had it, which she now calls hers. Who has more tact and humility in her fingernails than in my entire body. Who was never quite sure she “belonged” in the Red Run Group, to say nothing of instructing guys old enough to be her father, yet demonstrating from the outset that she had earned it as well as anyone there.

I remember a few years when there was some real doubt that CNY would survive at all. That it had been mis-used by some as a marketing outlet instead of its real purpose; that of providing for those who actually care enough to get it, a venue where some of the most genuine people you will ever meet share a common bond which just happens to be associated with a German Car company. That a very select few have provided this wonderful value for so many, entirely from the goodness of their hearts. Especially when the list of alternatives they could have easily been doing instead is considered. I am proud to have had the honor of making my contribution. I hope you will make yours. Thank you.

